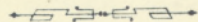


NATURAL RELIGION,

BY

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The thoughtful student of history descries more than a tumult of names, dates and events wrought out in wearying routine upon the page before him. Like the carpet of dry sticks and withered leaves beneath a dense forest, they are but an arid waste of rubbish; yet are skeletons all, are moulds, declaring to him in their very structure the past of that selfsame, abiding principle of life which now he sees animating and fashioning all about him. It is to trace the slow elaboration of this perennial, vital force, Civilization, that the historian ponders over its many by-gone archetypes, bearing the name of annals. Through all its past he finds it to resemble an organic growth: now flourishing for a season, now

stunted and languishing; during a Periclean Age, like the palm, limited in its outer reach, but piercing upward to heights erstwhile unattained; then in a later Alexandrian Era, less lofty, but like the banyan, spreading far out over the Orient; yet through all its vicissitudes, ever amassing greater and greater proportions.

This soul of history, civilization, is oftentimes confused with its works, and is then analyzed into various elements such as the useful and the fine arts, government, education and religion. But these, taken objectively, are no more civilization, than is the coral reef identical with the polyp life by which it is augmented. Yet trace these same elements to their conception in the mental faculties of mankind, - to intellect, or to the aesthetic, social or religious nature, - and you have found the actual, constituent elements of civilization. The civilization, then,

of a people at any given time is the composite of all their individual minds; the sum total of their every mental experience. Therefore, the advance in civilization which the historian traces so distinctly through past ages can be taken as a record of corresponding progress in man's development of his soul. Some peoples may have trained particular mental faculties to a perfection seldom since attained, as did the Greeks their aesthetic nature and their powers of abstraction; yet we must admit that the gradual unfolding of the mind, taken as a whole, is what is meant by growth in civilization.

What has caused this gradual development of mind from age to age? It is too uniform to be the work of chance. Nor can it proceed from any innate tendency alone, for many a nation is no higher in the scale of culture than it was a score of centuries ago.

The mind is only known as active, and its action is constructive. However, this activity is the tool of the will, and the will acts not without a motive. According, then, as the actuating purposes in life become more intense, and demand for their fulfillment a more perfect and exhaustive development of man's every faculty will the human soul attain a higher excellence, and civilization move forward. A host of cravings has the human heart; yet if they be allowed to run their course unchecked, the animal passions are sure to prevail, and there is no escape from barbarism. Nor can reason command these forces to the best advantage, for all the schools of Greek philosophy failed to furnish an ideal aim of life which we of today do not deem inadequate.

A careful comparison of the history of civilization with that of the leading institutions of enlightened peoples

will quickly point out the source of the civilizing rule of conduct. It will show the fate of religion and of civilization to be identical. Most plainly is this seen in the course of Christianity. It was with the reception of the Christian faith that our barbarian ancestors, and, in fact, all of Teutonic blood first began to seek for something better. As the religious conceptions became degraded, civilization languished, until, with the reforms of Luther and his day, it again took on new life. So, wherever a purer form of religion has supplanted one less perfect, or the reverse has happened, the change has advanced or retarded the enlightenment of the race. It is plain that, for the important duty of informing man concerning his place, his purpose and his relations as a created being, and to be a constraining influence, urging him to live up to his convictions, was the religious nature implanted in the human soul. The Creator intended

man to be, not a barbarian, but a sinless, civilized being, and accordingly endowed him with a nature, demanding and delighting in such an existence. This religious nature was perverted by the sin that estranged humanity from God, so that man could nevermore by its aid alone make a perfect distinction between the right and the wrong in conduct. Yet it has always given rise to some more or less vague conception of duty, and so has ever served its purpose as a civilizing force.

Moreover, religious feeling, though intuitive, is, like all the other faculties of the mind, susceptible of development. But just as it must furnish the motives leading to a higher civilized state, so is this higher grade of mental equipment requisite for its own unfolding. That is, the interaction between the developing mind and intuitive religious conception

is mutual. While sinful imperfection prohibits religious nature from ever doing its perfect work, it still may expand in concert with the other faculties into an increasingly effectual power. Yet progress after such a fashion has always been slow and tedious, and nations left with only the promptings of the inner nature to aid them in the struggle to learn of God and His will concerning man have made scant headway. Even at this late day are there some few tribes of men who still hold to the most primitive forms of worship, and many more there are who embrace natural religions of a nature but little less crude.

A religion having its inception and support wholly in the human nature is called Natural to distinguish it from Revealed Religion. In working out His plans for the salvation of the race, God chose

8
a people to whom he committed, through His inspired prophets, that perfect knowledge of Himself and His will towards man, which the human soul in its corrupted state could never of itself have reached. In the fullness of time the Divine Goodness further revealed a new dispensation, and provided man with a practical example of a perfect life in the character of Jesus Christ. It is Holy Writ, the compilation of all the inspired writings containing these revelations, upon which revealed religion is built, and which, as an infallible guide in life, has so quickened the advances of civilization since the Christian era.

It must not be inferred that this distinction between natural and revealed religion is meant to imply any confirmed discordance between the two. In fact, it is

9
only as revelation quickens and trains aright
an appreciative religious nature, that the
soul enters upon the highest and purest
worship of its Maker. Human intuition and
Divine revelation can only be set at variance by
disregarding their complementary nature, and in
the most reckless extreme of either naturalism
or dogmatism, magnifying one to the entire
exclusion of the other.

Before proceeding further it may be well
to fix upon some exact definition of religion. It
will be readily seen that this is no easy task.
There must be some generic characteristics
possessed by all religions alike, yet the diver-
gence of such forms as animism, pantheism and
Christianity admits of but few points in common.
Perhaps, after a scientific and unprejudiced

comparison of all existing religions, the requisite elements of a religion might be said to be:—The assent of a part or all of the mental faculties to the existence of an unseen, superior Intelligence, having power over or claims upon man; and a knowledge of, and an attempt by the mind to follow, some course of action, adjusted, at least supposedly, to man's relations to this superhuman Power. Of course this would be a most absurdly inadequate definition for Christianity or even the higher forms of natural religion, but it must be observed that it is the connotation of religion as a generic term, and not in any specific sense, that we desire. Indeed, as any natural religion is but the more or less feeble grasp of the unaided human soul after the truths of pure religion, it is reasonable to suppose that there might have been, at an early day, forms of religion unknown to us, so

feeble and degraded as not even to fulfil all the requirements of the above definition. In order, then, to exclude no probable case it is only possible to say that a religion is the result of an effort to attain to the ideal, pure religion. Or, to put it in a more precise form: Religion is some degree of approximation to an assent of the entire soul to the existence of a perfect, infinite Mind, the Creator and Ruler of the universe; to the consciousness of dependence upon, of duty towards, and of sinfulness in the sight of the Supreme Being; and to a life, seeking reconciliation with God by doing His will, and worshipping Him as its All in All.

The origin of religion has been a mooted question. Theories utterly unreasonable and others, expressing only partially the truth, have been advanced. There are those who would ascribe all religion to an original Divine revelation. But what meaning would revelation have

to a soul without an appreciating religious nature? For it would be nonsensical to suppose that the mind possesses a religious faculty that lies dormant until it be aroused by revelation. The faculties have no existence distinct from each other, but are mere varying forms of mental activity, and as such, are subject to the same laws of development. A religious nature, then, would develop a religion ere revelation overtook it; and so, the theory must needs do away with the intuitive religious feeling to establish its claims. Supposing, though, that a non-religious human nature were intrusted with a revealed religion, and that this were handed down by tradition merely, would not its last vestiges have disappeared before now among at least some portions of the race? Yet, there is not a people without some form of worship, and many a religion has taken on a

purver form in time, a thing impossible without the aid of a religious nature. Clearly, revelation, however much it may have vitalized and perfected the work of man's inborn nature, never introduced religion into human life.

The sensationalistic philosopher likewise denies to man a religious nature. He would construct religion, as well as all other aspects of human nature through the agency of some unthinkable interaction among sensations. But his philosophy is untenable, and it is unnecessary to stop here to prove that by no scheme of compounding or interacting could mere sensations of sound, light, form and the like, make themselves over into conscience, the idea of God, and a feeling of dependence upon Him.

If neither direct revelation nor evolution

will account for religion, then must it germinate from some involved mental principle. Yet even within this limit is there room for error. Some would account for all religious phenomena by superstition springing from man's ignorance of nature's laws. Then would the religious element in man's life give way before the advance of science, an hypothesis flatly contradicted by the historic experience of the race. More correctly have the "spontaneous apperceptions of reason" been proposed as the stuff whereof religion is made; but they alone could never account for the part feeling plays. Neither could feeling, as the sole ground of religion, furnish ideas of Theistic attributes such as the Infinite, the Omnipresent, the Unconditioned Cause. Both feeling and reason, and in fact the whole array of possible spiritual activities are factors.

contributing to complete the religious in man. Religious feeling is the posture that the soul assumes, primarily towards God, and as an implication of this, towards mankind and itself, as the result of its total experience. It is the capacity of the soul thus, as the indirect issue of its every activity, to come to appreciate and to try to conform itself to its place and purpose in creation that constitutes religious feeling a faculty. That it is dependent for its symmetrical unfolding upon every phase of the spiritual life is manifest in that practical religion conditions and satisfies the entire soul in all its functions. In order to trace religion to the separate faculties in which it is grounded, and to determine what part each of them contributes, it is necessary to resolve every religion into two elements which can be best considered singly. These are, the

idea of Deity and ethical feeling; or, otherwise, creed and morals.

Many and diverse are the attempts that have been made to logically deduce the conception of God. But the endeavor has usually amounted to only an effort to establish the Divine Unity or some other single attribute, and has often failed even of that. However, this does not affect our belief in God, which was a universal fact even before there was ever an appeal made to argumentation. A knowledge of God is so essential in human life that it is not made dependent upon any so uncertain and accidental a measure as a course of reasoning. For then it would only be within the reach of a mature intellect; as a matter of inference it might or might not be reached, according to the man's capricious turn of thought; and there would

certainly be room for the mind to conscientiously doubt the infallibility of the steps by which it reached its conclusion. But our conception of the Divine, though the slowest to arise, is yet one of the fundamental operations of the mind; so that the existence of a Supreme Being can not be consistently questioned without likewise deeming the universe which the mind also posits as an external reality, to be an illusion. Even the primal laws which underlie all reasoning have no firmer support in the mind than does our knowledge of the Infinite One.

To secure the best apprehension of how our belief in God arises, and of its place in our mental life, let us start with a comprehensive survey of things in the realm of reality. God in his omnipotence effected a cosmic creation which should be the embodiment of the categories of reasoning. Then

He shaped the human soul after His own image, but finite. This soul at first was, perhaps, but a latent something, the possibility of an activity, which, once incited into being by an external influence, would never cease, but go on and on, amassing energy, and of itself fulfilling its evolution from a "bundle of possibilities" into a true yet finite image of its Maker, ever drawing nearer to its Infinite Creator as its ideal. The Supreme Being fashioned out of a few cubic feet of matter a most ingenuous, complicated, yet perfectly adjusted, and self-repairing machine, well suited for the tool of a will to react upon other matter, and most exquisitely sensitive to the influence of external corporeal things. A state of interaction is established between the latent soul and the material body. The reactions of the body against the active forces of the world about awaken

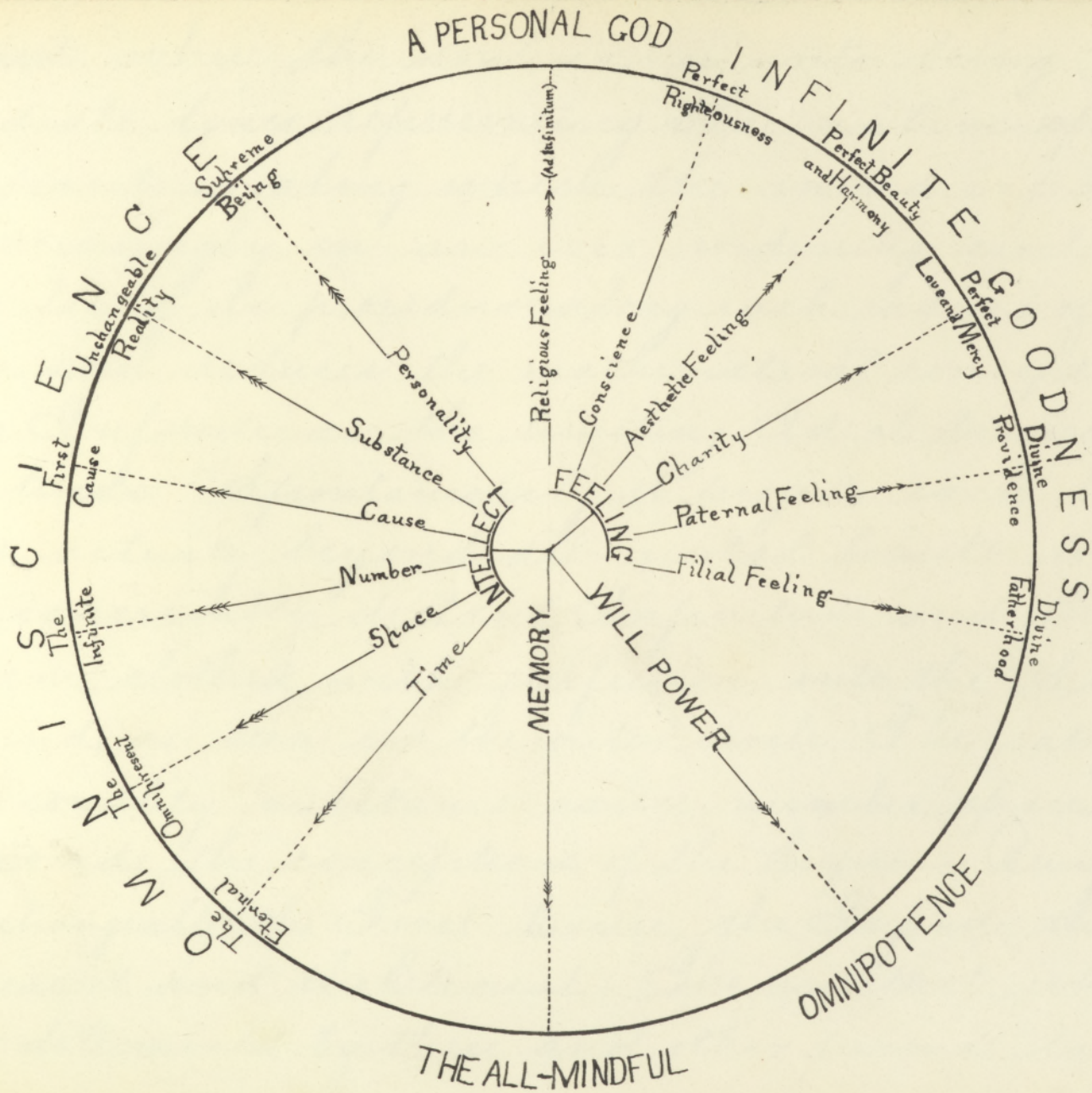
activities of the soul by some mysterious influence that baffles human insight. Light beating upon the eye is the occasion for the rise of feelings and sensations of the mind. The intellectual process of comparison begins so soon as it has sensations to compare, and this involves the inception of ideas of space, substance, cause and other laws of thought. As these ideas develop by degrees in response to the incitations of their cosmic embodiment upon the organs of sense, the soul constructs of them a mental universe, objectifies it, and believes it to be real. Furthermore, this mental world is peopled with human forms, which the soul believes to be controlled by spirits like itself. Finally, as not only the categories of thought, but each mental faculty reaches maturer stages, the soul constructs an ideal for every phase of its many-sided nature; assembles

these ideals into an Infinite Mind; and prosits this consummate Spirit as God. All knowledge, then, of the extra-mental rests upon spontaneous faith, and to doubt the veracity of intuitive faith must needs plunge the soul into hopeless despair.

The rise of the ideal concepts of the Infinite, the Perfect, is the inevitable outcome of the unfolding, through mental activity, of the most basal, intuitional facts of the spiritual life. As the soul expands along the lines of these intuitive capacities or ideas, and comes to understand the laws that govern its development, it also learns to recognize those laws as limiting its power of action, and by a process of abstraction, projects beyond the reach of limitations, a Mind like unto itself. The finite soul can never comprehend this infinite, ideal Being in its fullness,

yet accepts it, with perfect credence, as a reality. But the greater the knowledge that the soul has of the finite, the better does it appreciate what God is not, and the farther can it conceive the Infinite One to be from its own imperfection.

The accompanying figure is a rough attempt to display, by means of graphic representation, some of the above facts in a more tangible form. The scheme is far from being exhaustive, only those lines of mental action whose idealization in Deity is most conspicuous, being indicated. Nor has the attempt been made to accurately arrange the intuitions in respect to their mutual relationships. Naught but crude results could be expected from an attempt to exhibit mental phenomena by spatial relations, yet, perhaps, the device may serve to render the truth more obvious. From the central



point where the soul comes into being there radiate lines, representing the native spiritual capacities, along which the mind expands, unceasingly, in an ever widening circle. From the law of its procedure along each radius of its nature, the soul deduces the mathematical conception of the Infinite as the limiting Ideal towards which it tends. Spontaneously it projects each line of its activity beyond all mortal limits to the inconceivably distant Infinitude, and there erects them, clothed with perfection, into the Supreme Mind, as seen in the outer circle. The categories of personality, substance, cause, number, space, and time provide the conceptions of the Supreme Being, of the Unchangeable, the First Cause, the Infinite, the Omnipresent, and the Eternal. The intellect, whose action is determined by these and other primal laws of

thought, upon the notion of their perfection, can find its ideal of the Omniscient. Memory finds its supreme excellence in the All-Mindful. The free agency of will conceives its every limitation gone, and so contributes the attribute, Omnipotence. God is clothed with Divine Fatherhood by filial sentiment, while fraternal feeling sees in Him Divine Providence. Other affections of the human heart find their delight in the Infinite Love and Mercy. The aesthetic nature beholds in Deity the Ideal of Beauty and Harmony, and conscience finds in Him Perfect Holiness. Infinite Goodness is the culminating ideal of the sentiments. Thus each mental element adds its offering until a symmetrical, Infinite Mind has come to be a real existence to the finite soul. It is the part of religious feeling to acknowledge this Perfect Mind to be its personal Lord, Lawgiver and Judge.

It might be claimed that this procedure of constructing an Infinite, Perfect Mind is no more significant than any other process of abstraction; that it no more requires the existence of a God than do the conceptions of an infinitesimal, of the n th. root of a minus quantity and of similar abstractions, necessitate their embodiment somewhere in reality. But such a confusion can only arise when the most vital of distinctions is thoughtlessly or wilfully overlooked. The mind deifies its Ideal; believes it, knows it to have a separate existence beyond and above the sphere of human intelligence. But abstractions such as the above it never regards as having any meaning apart from its own activities. It is upon such spontaneous, intuitive faith by the soul in certain things that all knowledge and even reason itself is ultimately grounded. We never

suspect our faith in the primary laws of thought to be misplaced, nor do we question our belief in the existence of other minds. No more right have we to seek to quiet a guilty fear of Divine vengeance by striving to discredit the soul's trust in a personal God.

Though the soul may thus originate, spontaneously, the highest conception of Deity as the Ideal of its aspirations, provided it be sufficiently developed, yet reasoning probably accelerates the process. But too much stress must not be laid upon reason as a source of the Theistic idea, whatever be its utility in demonstration; for intellectual powers are slow maturing, and in the savage mind are greatly shriveled. Attempted deductions of a living God are often based upon the transparent evidences of design that acquaintance with nature and her laws unfolds to us. The argument from design is useful in its place, but cannot serve as a starting

point; for reasoning from design to Designer implicates the more elementary notion that the Designer is likewise the Creator. We must begin our ratiocination, then, with the law of cause and effect. We observe that it is obeyed by all material creation. Our minds apprehend that there must be some ultimate, self-sufficient cause at the bottom of things, and go in quest of it adown the list of alternating effects and causes, until brought to a standstill before matter, possessed of forces that act according to law. Our very conception of law in action is founded upon the relation of effect to cause; so matter, chained down by law, is surely an effect, even though no cause be apparent. The only thing we know, and the only thing we can conceive of as capable of arbitrary action is will. The sway of finite will over matter we know to be confined to the physical frame, and even there

restricted to operation through the established laws of force. Hence it, conditioned in its power by the laws of outward creation, must likewise be a creature. As nothing of which we gain direct knowledge through the senses is an unconditioned cause, there must be a disembodied, Omnipotent Will to which to attribute creation.

Having thus the conception of a First Cause as a nucleus, the intellect proceeds to invest it with other Divine attributes. The Creator must be an Intelligence, to account for the intelligibility of the universe, for the indications of plan and purpose manifest in all the activities of nature, and for the intellectual faculty of His creature man. Creation is not an assemblage of discordant or unrelated objects, but notwithstanding its disparity of parts, is bound into a single system by an intricate, infinite order of interaction.

Such perfect harmony could never reign throughout the creations of distinct causes, working apart from one another, and so the Divine Unity is a necessary conclusion. Other sides of the Divine Nature can be deduced by aid of the law of sufficient reason. It would be absurd to invest the Creating Mind with the power of shaping souls, having greater capacities than Itself, and so we must attribute to Deity all our own mental faculties. Moreover life means to us, among other things, the development of these faculties; and though we may not assert it as an established fact, yet we have grounds to conclude that the immortal soul will continue to expand throughout eternity. The stream can not rise higher than its source, and so the Divine Mind must be infinite and perfect in its every attribute in order to surpass all conceivable possibilities of human attainment. Such is the course that a

reasoning mind might follow to arrive at the conception of the Divine. It is plausible, then, that reason may assist to strengthen faith, although its help be not essential. But we may here repeat, that the conception of God we may at anytime have is not due to inference, but is the one great postulate demanded by all life's experiences alike.

The second of the elemental requisites for religious feeling is morality. Its basis is ethical feeling, an irreducible, native sentiment that is pleased with the right and dissatisfied with the wrong in conduct; that places us under obligations to do the right; and that rewards duty done and wrong-doing with the feelings of merit and demerit. As a mental faculty, the moral feelings are subject to growth and expansion, and really have little meaning until the soul attempts to solve the problems of life. At first they only smile

3
upon the simpler acts of love and justice, and condemn the opposites; but as a better understanding is had of true well-being in life, and of the eternal purpose in things, they come to make the nicest distinctions between the right and the wrong. But the highest ethical development is brought about only as God becomes the ideal of life; as the right is considered to be His will; and as duty to do right merges into obligation towards Him. It is because the idea of Deity and the moral sentiments meet in our nature, that we experience the feelings of sinfulness, of dependence and of duty with respect to Him, that constitute religious feeling. In consequence of this it is that, instead of staring coldly, even though enraptured, at God as mere ideal perfection, we approach Him with fear and reverence as the personal Judge, Saviour and Lord "In Whom we live and move and have our being."

We have now traced the religious phenomena to their firm foothold in the entire make-up of the mind. But it must not be supposed that the more perfect religious development here portrayed is within the reach of every mind. Our conception of God and our moral natures have been drawn out by an acquaintance with Divine revelation far beyond what they would have ever been if left to themselves. As the heathen mind develops, its religious sentiments become stronger and its conceptions of the Superhuman more definite. Yet without a clear delineation of the Divine attributes and of moral duty in the form of revelation, religious notions must always be vague, crowded with the mysterious, and forever vacillating. Each mind must needs have a somewhat different religion from every other; and when, in ^{the} midst of barbarism unusually powerful intellects have arisen, new

creeds and new codes of morals have they worked out, far ahead of those prevalent among their people. Such minds were those of Buddha and Confucius. It is, perhaps, due more to the labors of such religious founders than to the slow religious development of the masses, that among unchristian peoples better religions have been established and a better civilization made possible.